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ECONOMY

It's Time to Make Conservation Labour Visible Again

BY SIDDHARTHA KRISHNAN AND RINZI LAMA ON 01/05/2017 • LEAVE A COMMENT

What May Day narratives don't tell us about the role of the working class in conservation.

A porter in the Himalayas. Credit: Kiril Rusev/Flickr CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

May Day was not always International Workers' Day. Before it became International Workers' Day during the Second Communist International Congress in the 19th century, May Day was a traditional, temperate-region celebration of spring.

The onset of spring has conservationist connotations. Phenology, a conservation science branch that studies plant life-cycle events (like flowering and elevation) and climate influences, is closely linked to spring (http://www.pnas.org/content/111/29/10615.full.pdf). In India, spring, referred to popularly as *basant* or *vasantham*, is also marked by festivities. Conservation biology texts or forest conservation debates will not mention workers and labour, neither do the entries on May Day mention conservation. Conservation science and practice has not acknowledged the foundational and facilitative roles of the working classes. Labour scholarship, policy and politics have neglected the invisible and unorganised labour involved in conservation science and official forest protection. The biologically and culturally diverse eastern Himalayas are an apt geography to locate this labour-conservation conundrum.

Mountain labour

Visual and narrative accounts of Himalayan labour are available from photographs, travelogues and descriptions of the social life of the British. In colonial narratives and visual representations of Darjeeling, for instance, the English portray themselves as an integral and indispensable part of the landscape, while local folk become the prominent 'other'. Working classes, including indigenous Lepcha and Bhutia and migrant Nepali, served as porters for the British *sahebs*. They guarded forests against fires, especially the monoculture plantations of Cryptomeria (http://darjeelingtimes.com/is-cryptomeria-japonica-an-environmental-panic-or-blessing-for-the-darjeeling-hills/), a Japanese coniferous tree.

In colonial and contemporary Darjeeling, tea workers form the dominant labour imagery. Such construction of labour misses its multifarious roles, then and now. Working classes have broken their backs not just for planters in tea gardens, but also for scientists and tourists in forests.

Consider Singalila. The ridge between Sandakphu and Phalut in Darjeeling's Singalila National Park is a popular trekking and motor route. On a clear spring day, the views of rhododendron and magnolia flowers in full bloom, and the distant sight of Mount Everest and Kanchenjunga are breathtaking (breathtaking also literally – at 3,500 msl, even the slightest exercise will leave you short of breath). The altitude, combined with the steep and undulating terrain, means that people visiting require the services of porters and local working-class people. Singalila's subalpine and temperate elevations, and its diverse flora and fauna, attracted both colonial natural historians and today's conservation biologists. Tourists also visit Singalila in large numbers, whether trekkers, photographers or amateur ornithologists. Both the scientist and the tourist need the services of full-time porters for transporting luggage, ranging from scientific paraphernalia, food and water, camera lenses, tents and the like.

A 2015 field visit to Gorkhey (http://darjeelingtimes.com/mountain-tourism-the-gorkhey-story/), a pretty hamlet bordering Sikkim, which is usually the initiation or culmination point of the Singalila trek, is a revelation. Post fieldwork, we hired Chao, a poor 50-something porter. He carried

almost 30 kg of team luggage in a large bamboo basket for about 33 km through rough terrain, from Gorkhey to our destination point. Collecting a paltry sum of around Rs 2,000, he quickly ran back as we watched exhausted. Usually from marginalised classes and castes, porters like Chao in Singalila suffer due to the lack of resting and staying facilities. Caste and class relations, when combined with non-existent labour protection and the seasonal nature of tourism-related employment, pose material issues as well as larger quandaries relating to freedom and choice for porters.

Sensitive tourists, including conservationists, trekkers or photographers, will remember people like Chao. But porters whose labour was crucial for colonial natural history are a faceless detail, like the 'local assistants' of J.D Hooker, known to be Charles Darwin's close friend and one of the greatest Himalayan botanists. Between 1848 and 1850, Hooker is said to have undertaken botanical treks to Singalila, Sikkim and Bhutan. His *Himalayan Journals* and *Flora of British India* are standard books and backpacking companions for conservation biologists today. Many a species were named after him. But plants have never borne a porter's name.

Mutual indifference

Darjeeling's labouring classes, including forest porters, LPG cylinder carriers and tourist luggage porters in Darjeeling town, constitute an unorganised labour force. Porters in Himalayan forests and towns are mostly not unionised and not covered by labour laws. While labour policy debates around unorganised labour concentrate on the domestic seasonal migration of workers, the seasonal nature of work for forest and urban porters in India's mountains remain uncared for. The NDA government proposes to reduce nearly 100 'archaic' labour laws in four codes of wages, industrial relations, social security and welfare, and safety and working conditions. Labour unions and scholars have protested these business- and investor-friendly reforms. But the well being of mountain porters and other forest protection 'subordinates' will neither figure in the state's labour codes nor in the agitations and institutional negotiations of unions.

Compared to farm, fishery and factory work, Himalayan porterage is rarely the subject of labour scholarship. For that matter, the forest protection and conservation labour of Adivasis and Dalits in the rest of India rarely occupies the labour scholar's interest as does farm and factory labour. Consider the *International Labor and Working Class History Journal* (https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-labor-and-working-class-history) or the *Economic and Political Weekly* (http://www.epw.in/), two journals whose pages otherwise include the best of labour scholarship. Historical and contemporary Himalayan porterage is not discussed. There are no dedicated and exclusive research papers on Adivasi and Dalit labour in both conservation science and official forest protection in India. The rare *EPW* research paper on subordinate forest personnel will never use the concepts of labour studies.

Conservation, now an interdisciplinary field involving ecology and social sciences, has also failed to explicitly engage with the fact that the working classes sell physical effort and services to eco-tourists, conservation biologists and the forest department in and around India's national parks. Adivasi and Dalit limbs in the Himalayas and Western Ghats have since the colonial times remained crucial to forestry operations, whether as fire watchers, guides or mahouts. For conservation science operations, they have worked as field station drivers, graduate student forest 'guides', scientific equipment carriers and ecological 'plot' and 'transect' (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transect) layers and monitors.

Political ecology (https://entitleblog.org/2015/03/01/paul-robbins-on-labour-and-political-ecology/), a genre that investigates power relations in conservation, has paid some attention to whether the labour of dispossessed indigenes is useful in eco-tourism or climate change mitigation in national parks. But generally, conservation discourse obfuscates labour and working class realities by engaging with local community under the routine rubric of 'traditional knowledge'. Further obfuscation of labour occurs under the rubric of ecosystems services. Forests are to service humans by provisioning fuel and fodder, regulating floods and disease, and culturally servicing them with aesthetic and recreational opportunities. But concealed is the role of

labour in converting water, soil, fuel wood and landscapes into ostensible services. For instance, Gorkhey's 'manicured' appearance – a medley of streams, terraced farms, pine forests and home stays – involves the physical exertions of Sherpa and Kirati families.

This May Day, let us hope that conservation and recreation labour is afforded the policy and intellectual coverage it deserves.

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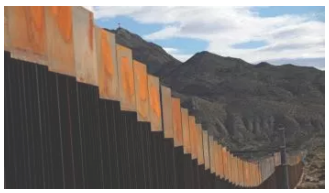

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